

Photospot:

Nkulengu Rail *Himantornis haematopus*

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Premières photos du Râle à pieds rouges *Himantornis haematopus* à l'état sauvage. Le Râle à pieds rouges *Himantornis haematopus*, espèce endémique à la forêt équatoriale africaine, est si différent des autres râles qu'il a été placé dans sa propre sous-famille monotypique Himantornithinae. Bien qu'il ne soit pas rare dans son habitat préféré et que son chant en duo sonore soit régulièrement entendu pendant la nuit, il est par ailleurs très discret et difficile à observer. Les photos présentées ici sont les premières à être publiées de ce râle à l'état sauvage. Elles montrent que le bec est bleuâtre avec une base jaune-vert et que les lores sont gris-bleu; les couleurs de ces parties sont souvent mal illustrées.

Nkulengu Rail *Himantornis haematopus* is endemic to the African rainforest, ranging from Guinea to western Uganda. This large, monotypic species is so distinct from other rails that it has been placed in its own subfamily, the Himantornithinae, based primarily on skeletal differences: the bird's bone structure is apparently closer to the South American trumpeters Psophiidae (Keith 1986, Taylor & van Perlo 1998). Additionally, the downy chick is not blackish, as in most other rails, but is uniquely patterned blackish brown and creamy buff.

Although Nkulengu Rail is frequent to locally common in its favoured habitat, it is a very skulking and notoriously hard-to-observe species.

It would therefore mostly remain unnoticed, were it not for its far-carrying, sonorous and rhythmic antiphonal duet, which is uttered mainly at dusk and during the night. 'Nkulengu' is the name given by the Bulu people from southern Cameroon and is derived from these characteristic vocalisations (Bannerman 1931). The sound reminded Bates (1930) of that of a distant pump. According to the Medje people, in what is now Congo-Kinshasa, the bird is saying 'jú-urúkwandra, jú-urúkwandra ...',



Figures 1–2. Nkulengu Rail *Himantornis haematopus*, Kakum National Park, Ghana, 9 May 2011 (David Fisher). Note the silvery-blue bill with a lime-green base and the greyish-blue lores.

Râle à pieds rouges *Himantornis haematopus*, Parc National de Kakum, Ghana, 9 mai 2011 (David Fisher). Noter le bec bleuâtre à la base jaune-vert et les lores gris-bleu.

meaning literally 'go away from my place' (Chapin 1939). This advice is reportedly addressed to the Leopard *Panthera pardus*, or to other birds, such as guineafowl (Numididae spp.). At Lukolela, on the Congo River, local villagers told Chapin that the bird laments 'nakatele akulu, nakakwela na nsusu', which means 'my feet became red, I married a chicken'. The story runs that the rail once came out of the forest and mated with a village chicken; the sun turned his feet red and the chicken cast him off. Back in the forest, his feet remained red, hence his repeated complaint (Chapin 1939).

Although probably most active in the morning and the evening, this rail also forages in the daytime, as a camera-trap photograph taken in the Putu range, eastern Liberia, in February 2011, proves (E. Greengrass *in litt.* 2011). The photographs presented here are the first of the species taken in the wild (apart from the aforementioned camera-trap image) and were digiscoped about 30 minutes after dark on 9 May 2011 in Kakum National Park, Ghana (Figs. 1–2). The bird was perched on a large bare branch c.7 m up. Its presence was given away by its loud call that was uttered twice c.5 minutes before we located the bird.

The photographs reveal that the colour of the soft parts is frequently inaccurately depicted in published illustrations. Although the long, rather stout legs are normally correctly illustrated as being bright red, the bill is often depicted as either uniformly grey or black, whereas it is actually silvery blue with a lime-green base. The lores

are also usually painted as being grey or black, whereas they are greyish blue in life. Presumably these discrepancies are due to the illustrations being based on specimens in which the colours of the soft parts have faded.

Acknowledgements

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References

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